

# Basic education has changed meaning through the years

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OLYMPIA – The Washington Legislature will spend much of the 2015 session debating how much to spend to cover the cost of “basic education” in the state’s public schools.

That may cause many Washington residents to ask, “What’s basic education?” It’s more than the old “3 Rs,” but how much more is whatever the Legislature says it is, providing it supplies enough money to satisfy the state Supreme Court.

An article in the state constitution says children have a right to an amply funded education, and education is the state’s top, or “paramount,” duty.

In 1976, the state Supreme Court said it’s up to the Legislature to define basic education, which it did in 1977. Lawmakers at the time set out simple standards such as being able to use words, numbers, symbols, sounds, colors, shapes and textures; organize words for verbal and nonverbal expression; be able to solve problems, make decisions, set goals, plan and evaluate things; and use muscles for physical and mental functions. The Legislature also ordered a 180-day school year and minimum hours in certain subjects, as well as setting up ways for taxes to pay for things.

Over the years, the Legislature changed the definition of education and the taxing systems, and school districts have gone to court to argue the state wasn’t living up to its responsibilities. Assistance for remedial education and bilingual instruction for students who don’t speak English was added, as was transportation for those who lived far from school.

In 1993, the Legislature redefined basic education to include “read with comprehension, write with skill and communicate effectively.” Students should also know the core concepts of math, science, civics, history, geography, arts, health and fitness; be able to think analytically, logically

and creatively; and understand the importance of work. Remedial education, bilingual transition to English and transportation stayed in the mix.

The state can pay for other things, the courts have ruled, if the money is available, but it must pay for basic education even when the budget is tight.

In 2009, the Legislature again redefined basic education, adding more credits for high school graduation and programs for “highly capable” students, optional all-day kindergarten and an extra 80 hours of instruction. It set new standards for teacher certification, better pay, better review of the effectiveness of programs. A year later it set standards for class sizes, staffing ratios and how much the state should spend per student on maintenance, supplies and operational costs.

But it didn’t set up systems to pay for these standards. That failure prompted Mathew and Stephanie McCleary and other families who formed the Network for Excellence in Washington Schools to sue. If the Legislature had provided a reliable source of money for the laws it passed in 2009 and 2010, it would be meeting its constitutional obligation to provide for basic education, the court said in 2012. But it was consistently failing to do that, so it wasn’t meeting that duty. The Legislature has until 2018 to meet that duty, the court said, and can’t redefine basic education solely for budget reasons.